Mentoring

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Many at-risk students may benefit from supportive, reflective, and skill-building relationships with adults that can connect them with relevant resources and guidance. Unfortunately, even when teachers are able to identify students in their class that may be at risk for behavior problems and eventual school dropout, they often do not have the time to seek out these students extensively (Johnson & Lampley, 2010). Yet, research suggests that students who have an on-going relationship with adults feel a greater sense of belonging, attachment, and involvement in school (Dynarski, et. al, 2008). Therefore, many schools have chosen to adopt student mentoring programs, with approximately 30 percent of all mentoring programs taking place in the school setting (Rhodes, 2002).

What is Mentoring?

A mentor is "someone who teachers or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person" ("Mentor". Merriam-Webster, n.d.). One who is mentored is often called a "mentee" although the term "protégé" is also used to describe a young person who is taught and helped by someone who has knowledge and experience ("Protégé." Merriam-Webster, n.d.). School and community mentoring programs therefore attempt to identify volunteer mentors to provide help and advice to child or adolescent mentees. The volunteers are matched with varying criteria to the mentees. Thr expectation of the mentor is involvement with the mentee for a minimum length of time.

Tier 2 Intervention

Mentoring is based on the idea that consistent and supportive relationships with positive adult role models can help children and adolescents make healthy decisions and avoid risk-taking behaviors. Once a relationship is established, mentors model good decision making skills, and provide advice and support to students. Sometimes the mentoring focus is to provide academic learning support, other times to provide recreation or enrichment experiences, and other times to simply provide time with a positive adult role model. Core facets of mentoring programs include positive relationships between adult mentors and youth mentees, skill building, and participation in beneficial community and school activities.

Mentoring programs may sometimes stand alone or be part of larger intervention programs for at-risk youth. The programs vary based on the criteria to become a mentor, the criteria for matching of the mentor to the mentee, the training provided to the mentor, the degree of involvement or time expected with the mentee, the minimum length of time that the mentor is expected to be involved with the mentee, and the degree of supervision or oversight provided by the program. While some mentoring programs are available to any youth, most are focused on youth who are at risk for negative academic or behavioral outcomes. However, since the mentors typically do not have specialized training, mentoring programs may not be advisable

for children and youth with serious or chronic behavioral or mental health problems.

The Need for Mentoring

Mentoring has been demonstrated to be effective with many different groups of youth, but has been particularly effective with youth in at-risk situations (National Drop-out Prevention Center/Network, 2012). However, according to the Office of Justice Programs (2011), "Of the 17.6 million young people who could benefit from having a mentor, only 2.5 million were in formal, one-to-one mentoring relationships in 2005," (p. 1) suggesting that mentoring programs could still use further expansion. Given the large number of adolescents at risk for anti-social behavior and other troubling outcomes (e.g., substance use, school delinquency, violence, risky sexual behaviors), and the high costs associated with professional therapy, experts have generated mentoring programs designed for youth that may be at-risk or already engaged in detrimental behaviors. Mentoring aims to focus on identifying the strengths that the youth already possess and to utilize those strengths to problem-solve and to achieve success in educational, career, or personal domains. Additionally, mentoring is an inexpensive intervention and can be delivered as frequently or infrequently as the mentor-mentee dyad deems necessary (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

Types of Mentoring

Mentoring programs typically fall into one of two categories: school-based mentoring and community-based mentoring. School-based mentoring occurs completely within the school. Community-based mentoring occurs through a community-based organization that is independent from the school. Additionally, each state and city will have often have mentoring programs. Each program may differ by city as well;

for example in Omaha, Nebraska, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is a school-based mentoring program, while in Lincoln, Nebraska, Big Brothers Big Sisters is community-based program. Additionally, there may be programs for specific minority or religious groups, which may be a better fit than general programs from the school or community.

School-based mentoring. In school-based mentoring, teachers refer students who are at-risk for school failure or engaging in risky behaviors to a mentoring program. Students may also be identified by other screening methods. A mentor will be sought out by the guidance counselor or other representative who works with the mentoring program. The mentors are usually given a background check, with community references checked. In some cases there is some minimal training provided to the mentor as well. The first meeting between the mentor and mentee will usually be overseen by the school representative, who will explain the

expectations and guidelines. Subsequent meetings will not usually include the representative, but he/she may contact the mentor regularly to check progress. The representative will also be available to answer any questions the mentor may have regarding how to handle situations or conversations. The mentor-mentee dyad will meet at the school, and will need special permission to meet outside of school grounds.

School-based programs, such as BBBSA, usually require mentors to meet one hour per week with their mentees. The dyads have meetings on the school campus, play school-related sports together, or eat lunch with one another. Proponents of school-based programs argue that since mentoring only requires one hour per week, these programs are able to recruit many adults in the community who may otherwise be too busy to volunteer for more time-intensive activities (Herrera, 1999; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011). It has also been found that school-based mentoring attracts more minority volunteers than other types of mentoring programs (Rhodes, 2002). Secondly, since teachers and parents can refer students to mentoring programs, in addition to parents, it is more likely that the students who need guidance will be served. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that most schools can identify a sufficient number of adult mentors to serve all of the students who might benefit from this type of experience.

Since all meetings occur on school grounds, parents do not need to worry about transporting their child to sponsored activities. Some element of supervision for the mentor may be in place as well. For example, in the BBBSA program, mentor-mentee relationships are monitored by a BBBSA employee, usually involving a monthly phone call to check-in.

Because these meetings take place at school, the mentor is then automatically linked to the culture of the school and is familiar with school policies and procedures, aiding in the mentor's ability to foster and support academic success in the mentee. Mentors are able to communicate with their mentee's teachers, attend parent-teacher conferences, and participate in other school activities, like science fairs or music

programs (Rhodes, 2002). Another benefit to school-based mentoring is that many adult mentors are more comfortable meeting with a mentee who may be of the opposite sex in a closely supervised school setting. It has also been suggested that school peers look favorably on youth that are involved in school-based mentoring programs since they receive personal, one-on-one adult attention and are valued and respected by adults (Herrera, 1999; Karcher & Herrera, 2007).

Unfortunately, school-based mentoring makes it difficult for mentors to meet with their mentees during the summer and holiday breaks. School-based mentoring also does not allow the mentor to expose the mentee to many resources in the community (Karcher & Herrera, 2007). Since the mentoring program is often housed at a particular school, students may also lose a school-based mentor if he or she moves to a school without a mentoring program. This may be particularly problematic given the high mobility rates for students at-risk for dropping out (Rhodes, 2002).

Community-Based Mentoring. Community-based mentoring is similar to school-based in terms of requirements and expectations of the mentor and mentee. However, in community-based mentoring, activities are planned by the mentor or mentee, such as going to the zoo, getting ice cream, or going to the park. Mentors in these situations are most commonly found on a volunteer basis. The organization provides a brief training for mentors to go over goals and expectations prior to receiving matches.. The pairs usually take turns paying for the activities, but each pair may decide differently. BBBSA operates a community-based program, but, unlike the school-based program, allows children as young as six to participate. Also, mentors are generally older, with most being 22-49. Community-based mentoring may ask for a larger

time commitment, ranging from 6-20 hours per month (Big Brothers Big Sisters Community-Based Mentoring Program, n.d.). One downside to community-based mentoring may be that the mentor-mentee dyad may be less focused on completing homework and assignments or school academic or behavioral issues.

What Do We Know About Mentoring?

The concept of mentoring is firmly grounded in psychological and developmental theoretical foundations. One prominent and traditional model of mentoring discussed in the literature is known as the Social Development Model (SDM). This model theorizes that mentoring increases students' attachment to positive adults, improves students' bonds with their schools, and heightens their perceptions of school climate. Increased school attachment and positive perceptions deter adolescents from participating in risky behaviors, particularly violence and substance use (Black, Grenard, Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2010).

The Model of Youth Mentoring (MYM) posits that a mentor may impact three specific areas of adolescent development throughout the mentoring relationship. These domains include social–emotional (e.g., recognizing and managing emotions), cognitive (e.g., reasoning, future-oriented thinking) and identity development (e.g., creating goals and forming values). As these three components are strengthened, youth are less likely to engage in problematic behavior (Black et al., 2010).

Positive Outcomes. There is evidence suggesting that mentoring relationships can lead to positive outcomes for youth. An early, but comprehensive and thorough review of BBBSA community-based programs (Tierney & Grossman, 1995) reported the following results: 46% decrease in initiating drug use; 27% decrease in initiating alcohol use; 38% decrease in frequency of hitting others; 37% decrease in skipped classes; and 37% decrease in lying to parents. A similar study of BBBSA school-based programs reported improvements in mentees' confidence, academic improvements, and improvements in school attendance (Rhodes, 2002). These positive developments were qualified by details that when the mentor could not meet with the mentee for a while or the mentor-mentee visits were inconsistent, the child's behavior became worse. It may be advantageous for mentoring programs to anticipate scheduling conflicts or losing contact with a mentor, and take steps to provide other supports for the mentee (Herrera, 1999). Additionally, Karcher and Herrera (2007) found that although school-related outcomes improved for students involved in school-based mentoring, community-based mentoring programs were more suited to address substance abuse issues or parental relationships. Positive school-based mentoring outcomes also did not carry-over into the second school year when most youth were no longer receiving mentoring services.

In an unrelated research study, known as the Harvard Mentoring Project, a group of researchers from Harvard University took 1000 young people who were placed on the wait list for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. These participants were randomly assigned to either the treatment group (i.e., receiving a mentor) or the control group (i.e., remaining on the wait list). Those who received mentors reported decreases in likelihood of using drugs or alcohol,

skipping school, or engaging in violent activities (Harvard Mentoring Project, n.d.).

Other positive impacts of mentoring include improvements in students' social status with peers and ability to make friends, confidence in their communication skills, ability to express feelings appropriately, office referrals, classroom behavior (i.e., following classroom rules), academic engagement (i.e., active classroom participation), attitudes towards school, and fighting with peers all improved following participation in a school-based mentoring program (Herrera, 2004). However, most of these improvements were only found for youth who participated in the program for at least one year, emphasizing the importance of the length of the mentoring relationship and the necessary commitment of the mentor.

Lack of Positive Outcomes. Stable, long-term mentoring relationships have been shown to have promising outcomes for at-risk youth; however, inconsistent or infrequent mentoring has been found to have zero or negative effects on mentees (Office of Justice Programs, 2011). Wheeler, Keller, and DuBois (2010) evaluated three studies of mentoring programs that produced differing results. Two studies found that there was not a significant improvement for students in the areas studied. The third study did find that students improved in behavior, academic performance and attitudes. When the researchers evaluating these studies aggregated the results, they found:
    "…evidence that school-based mentoring can be modestly effective for improving selected outcomes (i.e., support from non-familial adults, peer support, perceptions of scholastic efficacy, school-related misconduct, absenteeism, and truancy). Program effects are not apparent, however, for academic achievement or other outcomes" (Wheeler et al., 2010, p. 1).

Therefore, mentoring effects may strongly depend on the outcomes measured and the population sampled, as well as other factors related to the operation and supervision of the program, including the quality of adult mentors, and the extent to which a positive adult-child relationship can be established.

Variables Related to Mentoring Outcomes. Mentoring programs across the country are developed with many different goals and objectives. Most programs have been designed to expect changes and promote benefits in the general areas of academic achievement, employment or career preparation, social or behavior modification, family and parenting skills, and social responsibilities (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2012). Recently, programs have also been created for youth that experience a multitude of risk factors. For example, youth mentoring has been related to improvements in educational, vocational, and behavioral outcomes across at-risk groups, including residential youth (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013), youth in foster care (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013), justice-involved adolescents (Miller, Barnes, Miller, & McKinnon, 2013) and youth who have already been expelled from high school (Schwartz et al., 2013). Although mentoring has shown promising effects for youth who are traditionally difficult to reach and engage, these populations may benefit from and require supplemental interventions in addition to traditional mentoring approaches. For instance, youth who choose their own mentor (i.e., youth initiated mentoring; Schwartz et al., 2013) have been found to be more likely to have longer mentoring relationships. Formal and ongoing mentor training that emphasizes re-engaging youth is also associated with positive results (Miller et al., 2013). Further, youth with mentors of their same race have been found to have more frequent contacts with their mentor and maintain longer relationships (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2013). Thus, diverse candidates should be especially encouraged to participate as mentors for at-risk adolescents.

Mentoring programs that serve youth in foster care, detention facilities, or residential treatment may also need to provide mechanisms for continued mentoring even when youth change placements or locations frequently (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013). Staff serving these youth must also be invested or at least aware of the mentoring process and goals (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013) to ensure consistency and contacts with the mentor.

Building & Sustaining
Student Engagement

Several research studies also suggest inconsistent effects for mentoring. For example, in the Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) review, the authors failed to find any significant effects across outcomes measured, including academic achievement, school attendance, attitude, and behavior, although small gains in self-esteem from pre to post-intervention were reported. The researchers did not find that mentoring relationships are harmful, but rather the studies included in this analysis described mentoring programs that were only implemented for several months. Herrera and colleagues (2011) similarly reported that although a BBBSA program implemented in ten cities demonstrated gains in student academic outcomes, these ef-

fects only lasted for one year. This program also did not contribute to any significant improvements in students' global self-worth, classroom effort, relationships with parents or teachers, or frequency of problem behaviors. Thus, peers or familial forces may exert a stronger influence than a short mentoring relationship with an outside adult. It is also important to remember that most mentees can be exposed to negative environments where increases in seemingly valuable traits (e.g., self-esteem) may prove to be detrimental if manifested in the wrong manner (e.g., competition, over-confidence, further risk-taking). Therefore, it is critical that effective components and characteristics of mentoring programs be identified in order to avoid unintentional, albeit damaging effects.

There is empirical evidence that proposes that mentoring may prove to be more effective for particular groups of students. For example, students that were higher academic achievers at the start of the mentoring program benefited more than students who exhibited lower academic performances at the start of the program (Karcher & Herrera, 2007). Mentoring is also often more feasible for youth in populated areas than in rural or isolated communities, although

research is exploring the lack of mentors in rural areas (Miller et al., 2013). As stated earlier, the age of the student, the demographic characteristics of the student (e.g., gender, ethnicity), the length of the match and frequency of contacts (Miller et al., 2013), whether the relationship is a natural relationship, and the goals of mentoring (i.e., academic improvements, helping with substance abuse issues, or parental issues) will all influence the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship.

Mentee Characteristics. In a meta-analysis of six mentoring studies, Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) reported that most, but not all, mentees came from low-income families. Similarly, many mentees in BBBSA programs are minority students, students with free and reduced lunch, or students with low test scores (Herrera 1999; Herrera, 2004). School staff involved in BBBSA stated that they refer "the neediest" students with a range of academic, social, and behavioral problems (Herrera, 1999 p. 4), although many gifted students from low-income families are also referred. Specific difficulties that mentees may experience include peer relationship problems, poor social skills, difficulty communicating with parents and teachers, disruptive behaviors, poor academic grades, and a negative attitude towards academics. Other students that are often referred come from families with uninvolved parents or single-parent homes (Herrera, 2004). There has been additional evidence to suggest that girls may be more receptive to mentoring than boys and younger students may be more receptive than older students. Mentoring is often perceived as a helping relationship, which may be more attractive to girls and younger children (Karcher & Herrera, 2007).

Mentor Characteristics. A 2006 poll indicated that 870,000 adults are mentoring children in schools, not including high school aged mentors (Karcher & Herrera, 2007). Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) reported that roughly 60-70% of mentors tend to be female. Another study investigating BBBSA programs found that most mentors are professionals with stable jobs and families, although many 19 and 20 year-old college students also volunteer (Herrera, 1999). Many mentors become involved with mentoring

through their business or church. Interestingly, mentors that participated in school-based programs preferred this approach over community-based mentoring because they were able to distance themselves from the child's home life and encourage the child to solely focus on academics or school activities (Herrera, 1999).

Wood and Mayo-Wilson (2012) found that mentor training ranged from one hour to two days. Herrera (1999) reported that school-based mentor training includes modules on how to report abuse and relationship-building activities. Mentors also receive a lengthy manual with information on goal-setting, self-esteem, and other related topics. Regardless of the scope or the location of a mentoring program, mentors usually must pass background checks or   Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) screens (if they will be transporting their mentees). Mentor-mentee activities range from conversations to community outings to completing academic work. Frequency of the interventions varied in length from one hour per week to six hours per week (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

Research supports the idea that longer, more supportive relationships will produce lasting change in mentees' lives (Herrera, 2004). According to the Office of Justice Programs (2011), mentoring relationships average nine months in length (about the length of an academic year), but 38 percent of mentors engaged in a 12-month relationship with their mentees. Many mentoring relationships are natural, which are formed more authentically without being prompted by an outside agency. Although much of the research literature has been devoted to examining formal mentoring relationships, many have theorized that natural mentoring relationships may be especially critical since they may last longer and mentors and mentees may share more similar characteristics (Black et al., 2010). Factors found to influence the quality of the mentoring relationship, regardless of mentoring program, include the mentor's approach (i.e., the mentor takes the mentee's interests and preferences into account), support for mentors (i.e., through the schools or the mentoring agency), and

matching criteria (i.e., mentors and mentees are matched based on interests). Mentors who report stronger, closer relationships with their mentees are also more likely to continue the mentoring relationship in the future (Herrera, 2004).

Key Elements to Successful Mentoring Programs

Among the many components required in a structured mentoring program, the most critical elements that should be integrated into a successful program include:
- Skiba and Wu (2000) advise organizations to consider how mentors will be recruited, screened, matched, and how much time mentors will need to commit.
- Developmental activities that involve getting to know mentees and relate to mentees' interests (Karcher & Herrera, 2007)
- Increased longevity and frequency of mentoring relationships, as well as summer contact between mentors and their school-based mentees (Skiba & Wu, 2000; Karcher & Herrera, 2007)
- Training on how to terminate relationships effectively (Karcher & Herrera, 2007)

Schineller (2009) also recommends including the collection of data on "the number of youth mentored, number of mentors, frequency, duration and total hours of the mentoring relationship, retention of mentors/mentees, and specific youth performance and achievement outcomes (i.e. demographic data, grades, test scores, attendance, self-esteem)" (p. 19). Mentor-mentee satisfaction surveys may also be beneficial in measuring relationship factors involved in mentoring.

Conclusion

Although the outcomes of mentoring studies tend to be mixed, mentoring relationships have the potential to be effective, particularly when outcomes are selected and efforts are made to create lasting relationships. Particular considerations for mentoring program developers and practitioners include the length of the mentoring relationship, recruitment and screening of mentors, mentor training, mentee mobility, mentoring activities, and consistent systematic evaluation and modifications of mentoring programs based on data.

There have been no large widespread controlled studies of mentoring, probably due to the wide variation in the variables associated with mentoring programs as discussed earlier,

including the goals, populations served, training, supervision, etc. In spite of this, there have been numerous studies which have documented positive outcomes from specific mentoring programs. These programs continue to have widespread community support. In addition, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention continues to have a major initiative supporting mentoring programs. As a result mentoring programs continue to be a promising and potentially valuable addition to school and community efforts to positively affect student outcomes.

Recommended Citation

References on Mentoring

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